

## Web-Based Radio Show

### Series on Learning Differences, Learning Challenges, and Learning Strengths:


#### *Principles to Live By: Basic Truths About Life, Relationships, Children, and Families – Respectful Guidance and Limits – Part 4 of 4*

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Welcome to our web-based radio show. Thank you for joining us. As you know, we have been doing a series on “Principles to Live By” and these are principles that apply to relationships with children, but as well as adult relationships and even organizational relationships. We have covered basic principles like “Give more, expect more,” “Bring out the best in the other,” and today we are going to focus on another principle. The principle is going to be a very, very important one; one that is part of all relationships, having to do with setting limits. We certainly know that in parent-child relationships, setting limits is critical, and you can’t simply indulge and give and be a great Floortimer and be empathetic without also having to set limits, because all kids need guidelines. Perhaps we should title this principle, “How to set limits in a respectful, growth-producing manner that enriches the relationship and leads to more mutual respect.” It’s kind of a long-winded title, but maybe we can shorten it and talk about respectful limits or respectful growth-producing limits or respectful growth-producing guidance. But I think you get the idea of what we are addressing.

What are the principles of respectful guidance and limits? I think that’s a good title, “Respectful Guidance and Limits” which everyone needs in all relationships because we all test the waters with one another and all of us come from different backgrounds, where different things are permitted and not permitted. Every individual is a culture unto themselves in essence, and we always talk about cultural differences and understanding cultural differences, but each of us has had a different set of experiences in growing up, and even if we had the same parents, we had different types of interactions with them because we have different temperaments and we call forth different reactions from them. So we are all unique and different; all cultures unto ourselves, and therefore, when we interact with others – our spouses, our best friends,



our children – we have different expectations from one another. That leads to confusion. One father, for example, may expect his kids to be very obedient. Another father that I talked to recently, expected his kids to be challenging and it was good for them because they would learn to question authority and to see it in the world. Two different expectations from two excellent daddies – one who wanted obedience and following the rules and how else would they hold a job, and the other thought how else would they make their mark on the world unless they challenged authority and got creative and don't just accept what they are told. So we can see how it is very, very important to decipher what we mean by respectful guidance and limits in relationships, particularly given the fact that all of us are so, so different.


What I have done is try to distill some principles that can characterize all relationships. One important principle is ***do not set the same limits for all types of behaviors***. This is particularly important with parent-child relationships, but also in adult relationships we tend to think we need to be firm; we need to be consistent. I would say here that perhaps the subtitle for this principle is “consistency is over-rated” or “consistency can be your enemy some of the time.” Let's take an example of an adult-child relationship. You want to be consistent in setting your limits so you tell your child, “You shouldn't get up from the dinner table while we are all talking and eating, you should stay with the family and also you aren't supposed to bite other children.” Now, biting other children is a real no-no. I mean, that is dangerous to them, it is a dangerous habit for your child to get into, and it crosses the line. As an adult, it is a criminal activity. In a child, it crosses the line. Do we enforce that in the same way – with the same degree of consistent firmness that we do getting up from the dinner table? Or, using an off-color word? What is the message the child gets if you do it the same way? For example, little Johnny's mom was very, very big on consistency. So he would get the same half hour of time-out and lost his TV privileges for the day, whether he burped at the dinner table or whether he bit another child. So what was little Johnny learning? There is no difference, basically, between these two misdeeds. Both were not good things to do, but pretty soon there were so many things he shouldn't do that he was basically losing privileges every day and having hours of time-outs every day, and eventually he threw caution to the wind and just became very rebellious and negative. As he explained to me when finally the parents sought therapeutic help, “There's no way to win with my parents; they are just on my case all the time.” He felt literally suffocated. I had to agree with him, in part. There was no differentiation between levels. Even in our criminal justice system we have a traffic ticket or a parking in a no



parking zone has very different sort of consequences than going out and hitting someone or taking a gun and shooting someone or robbing a bank. There are different levels. Some behaviors are truly crossing the line in society; other behaviors are considered a slap-on-the-hand kind of punishments. Yes, you shouldn't park in a no parking zone, but it is minor compared to assaulting somebody else.

Similarly, children, in order to become thinkers, in order to discriminate, in order to learn that there are different levels to their misdeeds, need to have different consequences. So consistency shouldn't mean the same punishment or consequences or limit all the time. It should mean differentiating based on the severity of the misdeed, and also the nature of it, within each family, each family just like each individual is a culture unto itself. In some families, certain values are more important than other values. For some families, for example, the value of using proper language may be very, very important. They may want to make that a very serious limit. For other families, it may not be. But aggressive behavior, where someone else is being hurt is a very serious offense, and for another family, the family may enjoy the siblings wrestling and fighting and occasionally bruising one another. In another family, that may be totally off limits. Within the realm of reason, where children are protected, basically safe, and secure, families will differ in their family cultures. The football playing family may want the wrestling and the occasional bruising. The family that is more interested in poetry and music may think that that is the worst thing in the world. Both may be correct within their families and within their cultures. So one of the ways families have of teaching values is through differential consequences; through having different values, and therefore different levels of sanctions.


Now when we come to adult relationships, it is the same way. How do we create flexibility, and yet have limits? Well, Stephanie and her new boyfriend, Steven, were beginning to date and Stephanie really liked punctuality. It was very, very important to her. She was very busy – she was a busy executive, she led a busy life. She really liked Steven. Steven was laid back, *laissez-faire*, liked to do things according to his own pace, show up a half hour late, or 15 or 20 minutes late. Stephanie would “break her behind” to get home in time to be ready for dinner with him, cutting off conferences and colleagues, and then he would show up half hour late and she would be infuriated. Well, that was an important value for her. A prior girlfriend of Steven's was laid back like him. A half hour late was fine because it gave her a little bit more time to listen to some music, relax, read the newspaper, and put her feet up before he came over. How



did Stephanie enforce the limit or give Steven the guidance he needed to know if they were going to have a successful relationship? Steven liked everything about Stephanie, and in fact, he respected her industriousness and her efficiency. In fact, he had broken up with his prior girlfriend because they were too similar. No one took responsibility. Neither one of them got tickets for the show. Neither one of them made reservations at the restaurant. Neither one of them would clean up after they pigged out the evening before. So, they were too similar. He really liked Stephanie because she complimented him and Stephanie liked Steven because he relaxed her. He wasn't the high stress type. But, this one area of doing things on time was a constant source of conflict, leading to irritation and beginning to interfere with their intimacy and their warm, growing, loving feelings for one another.


So how would Stephanie set a limit on Steven that would convey this? To start off with, obviously talk about it. But that wasn't enough – Steven's habits were so strong and she felt so strongly about this and she wished he would come on time but didn't do it. She would be cold some evenings when they got together late and he would try to warm her up with jokes and making light of it and teasing and kibitzing and often succeeding in breaking through her defenses and she would have a good time in spite of her anger, even when she would try to hold to it, that wouldn't work very well. She decided, finally, that she needed to set a firm limit and firm guidance. The idea was how to do this in a respectful way that wouldn't be patronizing. She thought she just wouldn't go out with him that evening if he comes more than 15 minutes late. She decided that that would be petty and something you can do to a child but you can't do that to another adult.

So what would be a way that would be respectful and yet get the message home? The principle here is, especially for adult relationships but it will work for child relationships too, is to always, in your deferential relationships, this is really subtopic two in trying to have different consequences and setting limits to enforce the values that you would like to characterize the relationship is to always do it in a respectful manner. What she decided to do was to do it in a very positive way, which is to offer to do things that Steven really liked – he was a sports addict/fanatic, but loved to go to the local professional team's basketball games and football games, and she didn't mind doing that. She kind of enjoyed the spirit and the hoopla and the enthusiasm of it, but it didn't phase her one way or the other. But she liked being with Steven at these events because he had so much enthusiasm and she got caught up in the spirit of it. So she



told him she was getting tickets for these events, and she, in fact, made reservations and got tickets. But, because she was really stretching, if he showed up late, she wasn't going to give him the tickets. She wasn't being spiteful, it was that she really needed to draw the line here and wanted to know in advance that she was prepared to go the extra quarter mile so they could have fun together, but he really had to show some flexibility in her needs, even though he may disagree with it. It wasn't a question of right versus wrong or who was more correct, but just that there needed to be some mutuality. She thought this would be a respectful way of doing it because she was actually tuning in to one of his important needs and doing something for him. To be sure, he tested the limits. They had tickets to a football game and he was really looking forward to it, he showed up 35 minutes late and she got her pajamas on and invited him to stay and watch the game on TV but there was no way she was going to use those tickets and she said she had already given them to a neighbor and they were gone, and she wishes they could have gone together. He got the message. This happened a few times, one time with a basketball game and one time with a football game, and each time she was warm, she was loving, she was sweet, and they did something else but not as enjoyable for Steven as actually going to the game. She was both the "good cop" and "bad cop" combined. She set the limit, set the guidance, but was empathetic. She let him talk about his disappointment and even absorbed his outrage that she would be so petty as to actually enforce it and said that she felt she had to keep to her word, so she was firm and consistent, but warm about it. So that is principle #2 – ***be differing in your consequences, depending on your values, depending on what you want, and how you want to guide the other person in the relationship, whether it's an adult or a child – but be respectful. Try to do it in a positive way where you are offering as well as limit setting.*** So with a child, for example, do something special on a weekend, but you could lose that special trip to the toy store or the ice skating rink or to the horseback riding or the special ski trip. So you aren't taking away something that is routine, you take away something that is special so there is a positive incentive for upholding your side of the bargain, and a negative incentive for not.


The second part of it that is part of being respectful - is being the good cop and the bad cop at the same time. Set the limit, but don't be mean spirited about it. Don't enjoy, in a sadistic or mean way "getting even." This is not to get even, this is to enforce values that adults need as well as children need. In enforcing values, try to empathize with the other person's anger or disappointment, be warm, but keep the limit going. This includes when you have a child sit in a time-out. "I know this is hard, sweetheart, I




know you really wanted to play the Nintendo game and we are losing it, let's talk about it. How did this come about?" Always talk about how we can do better next time. With an adult, you don't want to be patronizing and actually with Stephanie and Steven when he lost his football game, in a kind of kibitzing or joking way she said, "Gee, we could be sitting on the 50 yard line eating those terrible hot dogs right now instead of here rubbing my cold feet!" So it was different than what you would do with a child, so always pitch it to the age of the person. Don't try to treat an adult like a child. But get your point across, and be good spirited and empathetic about it and try to have a good time in spite of losing the preferred activity. But let the other person know that there is a point where you can't be pushed.

This brings us to our third principle. So the first one was differential consequences for differential crimes, so to speak; the second is respectful limits where you have positive incentives as well as the limit and where you empathize and you are the good cop and bad cop at the same time where you aren't being mean or sadistic, and the third principle is ***the limit should be set in such a way to have meaning for the other person.*** Often parents ask me with children, "Well, he doesn't care if he misses a TV show." Well that may not be a good limit. As Henry Kissinger said in international relations setting limits, the consequences have to be stern enough or severe enough so the other person will find it meaningful or basically won't want it. You have to rise to the level to get the other person's attention in the way that it's something they want to avoid. So in setting actual economic consequences, it has to be something that is severe enough that they will say this is something I can't have happen to my country and that will obviously motivate the other person to negotiate rather than do whatever it is you didn't want them to do.

Same thing here with adults or with children. It has to rise to the level where it gets their attention and where they care about it. So with Steven, he is a sports fanatic so the football games really worked. With little Eddie, he loved Nintendo and other computer games. Missing some of those and having time-outs really worked. With another child, it might be a trip to the toy store or to the favorite amusement park. Interrupting activities itself for very young children – for 2-3 year olds not being able to play with their favorite truck for a half hour and having a time-out for 10-15 minutes can be sufficient. So the question is what will get the other person's attention, what is going to let them know you are serious.




Which leads us to a 4<sup>th</sup> principle, and this is characteristically true, especially in adult relationships and organizational relationships and work relationships as well as spousal relationships and friendships or growing friendships or growing romances. **You have to convey the seriousness of your intent.** I often ask the question when parents tell me that they won't follow any limits at all, he does whatever he wants to do. Then he throws a tantrum when we try to set a limit. I say, "Oh, well then what do you do with all the BM's in the living room and all the urine in the living room?" "What do you mean?" "Well, I'm sure he's not using the bathroom then and just if he feels like going to the bathroom he just goes in the living room, and all that broken China – your favorite China, I mean, I'm sure he just takes it and throws it whenever he is annoyed." "Oh, he would never do that." And I naively say, "Well, why not?" "He knows that he could never get away with that." "Well, how does he know that and how come he doesn't know he can't hit his brother or sister or can't swat back at you when you tell him he has to have a time-out?" So how did little Johnny come to learn one set of rules when it comes to where you go to the bathroom or how you treat the China, and yet another set of rules for hitting brother or sister or even slapping back at mommy when you are mad? As we reviewed in this particular family, they were never taught. There was never explicit limit setting instruction on bathroom behavior in the living room versus hitting behavior. So how does little Johnny figure this out? Well, he sensed the different emotions in the parent. When children are between 8 months and 20 months old, they are reading what I call "gestural communication" – facial expressions, vocal tones, twinkle in your eyes, body posture – way before they use words, they are hearing the tone in your voice and the expression in your face and the movement of your arms and legs and knowing your meanings. They can see when you are tensing up and they can see when they are in serious trouble. Most kids push, but they push up to a point and they get a sense of where they can push up to before the consequences are going to get very severe. Often they don't test beyond that point. Some children do and they require professional assistance in terms of figuring out how to help them. But the majority of kids don't push past that point, they just sense it. They sense it at a very early age and then later on it gets reinforced with words. Same thing at school or in the community. The same thing why adults will park in a no parking zone but they won't rob a bank. They are both breaking the law, but one seems permissible and the other you're crossing the line. This isn't typically because of a conscious knowledge – "well if I get caught robbing a bank I'll go to jail" – it's almost society itself has a sense about it where you know you have to tow the line and you can't cross certain points. We



internalize this. We feel much more anxious – the majority of us at least – not the hardened, antisocial personality types or people really prone to criminal behavior, I mean, most of us wouldn't want to severely hurt someone else. Most of us would not want to take something that really belonged to someone else comfortably. We internalize certain standards. We internalize certain feeling tones that are intuitive to us. Kids do this at a very early age. In fact many cultural values and guidance are transferred through these facial expressions and through these gestures way before children learn to speak. So it is interesting to notice in some cultures, certain types of aggressive behavior are not only tolerated but favored, and in other cultures, obedience is favored when you compare the two cultures. It is not surprising that people are so different. Again, as I mentioned before, every family and every individual is a culture unto themselves. So it takes sense and when adults tell me, for example, young adults who I work with who are constantly getting disrespected or feel they are getting psychologically abused in a relationship, you have to look at the subtle features of communication in that relationship. How come person A it never happens to and person B it happens to all the time? What are they conveying differently about their personality to other people? Is it the selection of the maid or romantic person that they relate to or is it in this nonverbal communication, in this conveying of seriousness or intent? So this principle was a long winded way of getting around to it, is around guidance and values, around setting limits, you have to convey your intent in such a way that to let the other person know you take this very seriously, just the way the parent conveys to the child that you don't go to the bathroom in the living room, that would be going too far, even having never said it explicitly. Similarly here, when a person shows up a half hour late for that date, the look in your eyes, the look in your face, the tone of your voice is going to convey whether they have crossed the line. People get a sense of crossing the line in the sense that they are endangering the relationship. In one family, the child says, "I would never do that because I don't know what my mom would do, I might lose that relationship. I might lose her love in a true sense." That child didn't want to test that. I'm not saying that was good for that family that the child felt that the mom's love was conditional and in another family, the child may feel that the love is unconditional and they can do anything they want to do. The child senses the limit.

In another family, with mother, little Harold would do as he wanted to do. The dad, who was a formidable person who was a big person with a serious side to him but of course he could have a lot of fun, he wouldn't do the same things. He basically towed the line and was much more obedient. When I asked him the difference, he said, "Well,




you just can't get away with that with Dad. You just know – you just look at his face, you hear the tone of his voice.” I said, “Well, what does that suggested would happen if you tried to do what you do with your mom, if you just didn't listen to him?” He said, “I wouldn't want to find out.” That's basically what it was. Was he scared of physical harm? Was he scared of losing his dad's love? Was he scared of losing his dad's respect? His dad never hit or hurt him, but yet he conveyed a certain seriousness about him that I'm sure was in the back of this little guy's mind. But he didn't want to lose his love or respect or the good things they had in the relationship.

So people get a sense of when they are crossing the line, when they are going to seriously injure that relationship and the things they value in it. That's all part of limit setting and setting values. It means that the person setting the guidance has to be prepared to follow through. It doesn't mean that they actually often follow through because often that is conveyed in the intent. It's conveyed in the “look.” So that is a very non-specific factor, you have to examine yourself. Do I really care about this? That's why I ask the question to the parents – well, I'm sure he's making BM's in the living room. Maybe this value could be “I'm sure he's making BM's in the living room because,” you have to say to him, “am I fooling myself? Maybe I don't care that much about it. Maybe I talk a good game but I'm not really backing it up.”

Ultimately, this is the last principle we'll talk about in setting limits, is for both children and adults and organizational relationships, ***good limits involve understanding the other person's perspective.*** It means that an open relationship where feelings are explored, where differences are explored, where there is mutual empathy, where the other principles we talked about in “Principles to Live By” are part of the relationship – where you are giving more and expecting more, you are bringing out the best in the other, you are understanding the other person's perspectives and able to empathize. All of this enables you to understand why your partner is setting a limit, whether it's a parent, spouse, good friend, or an emerging romantic relationship. As you understand them, you may want to please them. If they are doing good things for you, like giving more and expecting more, you have incentives to wanting to please them. The parent who is taking in limit setting and not giving, there is very little incentive. But the parent who is giving more and expecting more and expecting more as part of the setting limits, you have a lot to want to please the other person.

So it's very important to have this mutual understanding, empathy, truly understanding the other one's perspective, to recognize every individual is a different




culture – we all have different ways we interpret even the most common words as we talked about last time. So that is a very, very important part of limit setting. It's important to be reflective and understanding of yourself and others in a relationship between you and how you affect one another. This becomes very, very important in organizational limit setting, where you are creating a value; where you are guiding your colleagues; where you might be managing a group of colleagues in an important project at work. You are setting guidance, you are setting values, you are setting goals, and then you are enforcing limits. That will only work to the degree that there is a lot of warmth, nurturance, empathy, and mutual understanding. The same thing will occur in adult-to-adult relationships and adult-to-child relationships.

So at the bottom, always go back and when you have to work on the limits; when you have to work on the guidance, go back and ask yourself the basic question, “Am I doing the basics that perceive limit setting?” Is there enough good stuff going on – mutual empathy, respect, understanding, am I reflective enough, and is the other person reflective enough to understand – do you reflect enough to understand each other's needs? That creates the soil; that creates the garden within which limits can flourish.

Same thing is true for international relationships. You have people who are starving, who have nothing to gain, high unemployment rates – they aren't going to respect your values or limits. They believe in taking risks. If you really want to create values that permeate world relationships, everyone has to have a standard of living. Everyone has to buy into the system, so to speak, sufficiently that they see it is in their interests to understand the needs of the larger world and to participate in the larger world. They have to make sure that people have a roof over their heads, sufficient food, and shelter - basic security is met. You don't have to do it for people, but you have to make sure the opportunities are there that they can do it for themselves, whether it's direct economic incentives or other types of incentives.

So always step back to the basics and make sure they are in place, then start the road towards limits. Then do it in a way that you expect progress, but happy with small steps. Don't look for all-or-nothing home runs. Be very differential. In other words, have different kinds of consequences for different kinds of challenging of those limits. And when you need to enforce things, do it in a very respectful way with a lot of positive incentives. Do it with understanding and convey it in your intent so the person feels it in



their bones. They always come back and ask, “Are we having enough good things going on?”

So this is our discussion of limits. It’s part of all relationships, it’s part of the “Principles to Live By,” it is inherent in when you go back over 4,000 years ago, depending on your religion, to the Ten Commandments. But it became the basis, when you think about it, for organized societies. When you look back historically, when religions went to the monotheistic religions, there were a common set of principles, whether it was Christianity, Judaism, Islam, or some of the Asian religions, when we had a common set of principles, it gave men and women from the first cultures in different parts of the world opportunities to communicate with one another and even trade and develop economic policies with one another with some adherence; with common principles. The common principles were the beginning of limits; the beginning of values. They organized whole societies and allowed us to develop into groups so we could have efficiencies of scale and be creative and create new technologies and develop more complex societies. We may question how wide that was or is, given the nature of complex societies today, but it’s been an important part of human development and human evolution, and therefore one that is part of our principles and laws of relationships.

Thank you for joining us today, and we will speak to you again next week with another principle to guide us. Thank you.